



Media Release: Perth, May 28 2008

Australian High School Teacher Achieves Space Dream

Mark Gargano, Science Coordinator from St Joseph's School in Northam (WA) and Education Officer of Mars Society Australia, Inc and John Mitsinikos, Mathematics Coordinator from Strathmore Secondary College (Vic) have returned home as the first Australian high school teachers to participate in the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) Spaceward Bound (SB) program in the Mojave Desert.

The aim of this program was to allow scientists to increase their knowledge about desert conditions and further their research in linked areas, while participating educators had the unique opportunity to assist with this research and develop an appreciation for field science and data gathering techniques.

Under the guidance of the Spaceward Bound Mojave Principal Investigator Dr Chris McKay, a Planetary Scientist at the NASA Ames Research Center, a variety of areas were studied included examining cave interiors as part of a larger project on modelling microbial mats, collecting soil samples from 7 different sites that have different precipitation levels to investigate types of microbial action through DNA extractions and using thermography to identify positions of caves. Each activity has application to current and proposed Mars research.

Says Mark Gargano, 'As a Science Teacher, with a Physical Science background, who is actively involved in developing modules and investigations that enhance the understanding of the diverse area of Space Science I found the diverse range of activities that link very interesting. It has given me a greater depth and range of investigations that I can provide to my students as part of their Science classes'.

Those teachers attending the program now have first hand experience and knowledge of existing field studies and how they provide a basis for understanding systems at other locations on Earth and on Mars.

Mr Gargano adds, 'Through participation in a programme such as Spaceward Bound, where you are working alongside the leading space and planetary scientists in their fields, you go back to the class armed with ideas to excite the students with real world practices. This hopefully is the inspiration to get students to inquire further and perhaps consider some of these areas worthy of future study and perhaps even the basis of a future career'.

This opportunity came about after a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between MSA and NASA Spaceward Bound in July 2007. This was the first official connection between these organisations with a field science expedition and the beginning of a series of ventures that which will begin after the annual Australian Mars Exploration Conference (AMEC) in July 2008. A team of scientists, engineers and teachers will investigate sites in the Flinders Ranges of historical space science and geological interest in preparation for a Spaceward Bound program to be hosted by Australia in 2009.

Mark Gargano will be presenting 'Creating the Next Generation of Space Explorers Now' at AMEC 2008, which will give a more detailed outline of the program and how teachers and students can develop practical ideas for classrooms that link to actual current research projects.

Mars Society Australia is a not-for-profit, CSIRO approved research organisation pursuing research and education opportunities to ensure the exploration and settlement of the Red Planet, Mars. Information on Mars Society Australia and AMEC 2008 can be found at <http://www.marssociety.org.au/> and information on Spaceward Bound is to be found at <http://quest.nasa.gov/projects/spacewardbound/>

Media interviews with Mr Mark Gargano or Mr David Cooper of Mars Society Australia can be arranged upon request. Please contact Mr David Cooper on [08] 9295 6466 or email him at president@marssociety.org.au

Mark Gargano would like to acknowledge the assistance of St Joseph's School and MSA for providing the opportunity for his involvement in Spaceward Bound 2008.